

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-07

L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 SSC-01 /058 W

-----122411 220704Z /17

R 220445Z DEC 77

FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9100

C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 5073

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PDIP, PINR, CE

SUBJ: POSSIBLE NEW SRI LANKA AMBASSADOR TO UNITED STATES

1. SUMMARY: ACCORDING TO A DECEMBER 20 LOCAL PRESS REPORT, W.S. KARUNARATNE WILL REPLACE NEVILLE KANAKARATNE AS AMBASSADOR AT WASHINGTON. WHILE MFA OFFICIALS HAVE DECLINED OFFICIAL COMMENT, THEY INDICATE THAT KARUNARATNE'S APPOINTMENT IS BEING CONSIDERED. END SUMMARY.

2. KARUNARATNE IS 49 YEARS OLD, SRI LANKA'S MOST PROMINENT SCHOLAR OF BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY, AND A FORMER MEMBER OF THE MAHAJANA EKRATH PERAMURA (MEP), A MARXIST-NATIONALIST POLITICAL PARTY. HOWEVER, HE WAS REPORTEDLY AN AVOWED ANTI-MARXIST LEADER OF A NATIONALISTIC FACTION OF THE MEP.

3. IN AUGUST 1963, KARUNARATNE WAS ABLE TO ENTER THE U.S. UNDER A USIS GRANT AFTER HIS INELIGIBILITY UNDER SECTION 212 (A) (28) HAD BEEN WAIVED. IN 1963 HE PUBLICLY ANNOUNCED HIS RETIREMENT FROM POLITICS. WHILE IN HIS EARLIER DAYS HE WAS VIOLENTLY NATIONALIST AND ANTI-WESTERN, IN 1965 HE WAS DESCRIBED AS HAVING MELLOWED, AND BY 1970 WAS SUPPORTING THE UNITED NATIONAL PARTY (UNP). HE RAN FOR PARLIAMENT IN 1970 AS A UNP CANDIDATE, BUT LOST.

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4. ALTHOUGH CONTROVERSIAL, KARUNARATNE IS A HIGHLY RESPECTED PROFESSOR OF BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY. HE IS CONSIDERED TO BE SRI LANKA'S FINEST ORATOR WHEN SPEAKING IN SINHALESE. HE SPEAKS FLUENT ENGLISH, WITH AN EXTENSIVE VOCABULARY, BUT HAS A PECULIAR PRONOUNCIATION THAT TAKES SOME GETTING USED TO. HE IS DESCRIBED AS WELL-READ, WELL-SPOKEN, ABLE TO DISCERN

THE CORE OF PROBLEMS AND TO PUT THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE. KARUNARATNE IS SAID TO BE COSMOPOLITIAN, BUT NOT AS SMOOTH AS NEVILLE KANAKARATNE. HE HAS TRAVELD EXTENSIVELY ABROAD. IN ADDITION TO THE U.S. IN 1963-64, HE WAS IN LONDON IN 1954-56, AND IN RANGOON IN 1963.

5. KARUNARATNE IS FROM A RELATIVELY POOR FAMILY. HIS FATHER WAS A POLICEMAN AND IN SRI LANKA HE ALWAYS WEARS THE NATIONAL DRESS. HE IS MARRIED AND AS OF 1964 HAD AT LEAST THREE CHILDREN. MRS. KARUNARATNE (FNU) IS 48 YEARS OLD AND WAS ALSO A MEMBER OF THE MEP, PROBABLY FOR ABOUT ONE YEAR. SHE WAS NOT AN OFFICER OF THE PARTY. HER INADMISSABILITY TO THE U.S. UNDER SECTION 212 (A) (28) WAS WAIVED IN JANUARY 1964 WHEN SHE WENT THERE TO JOIN HER HUSBAND. MRS. KARUNARATNE IS A SCHOLAR IN HER OWN RIGHT AND OBTAINED A MASTERS DEGREE IN ENGLAND. SHE WORKED AS AN ASSISTANT EDITOR OF THE BUDDHIST ENCYCLOPEDIA, IN CHARGE OF THE MONGOLIAN AND TIBETAN BRANCH. SHE MAY HAVE STUDIED ORIENTAL LANGUAGES IN ENGLAND.
WRIGGINS

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: AMBASSADORS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 22-Dec-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977COLOMB05073
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770477-0201
Format: TEL
From: COLOMBO
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19771227/aaaaawty.tel
Line Count: 81
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: be1b49fe-c188-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 2
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 24-Feb-2005 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 149007
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: POSSIBLE NEW SRI LANKA AMBASSADOR TO UNITED STATES
TAGS: PDIP, PINR, CE
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odhc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/be1b49fe-c188-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009